

Post-16 GCSE Resit Practice Review

Summary

Spring 2024



Background

Gaining a 'good' pass in GCSE English and maths is widely viewed as important for supporting young people's academic and career opportunities and future life outcomes. Current policy states that students who do not hold a GCSE grade 4 or above must continue to study English and Maths. From September 2024, conditions of funding will require students to study for a longer number of hours per week (e.g. 4 hours per week for Maths).

There are a number of significant barriers and challenges which are likely to impede the delivery of the resits and affect the outcomes for young people. Since the raising of the participation rate to 18 in 2015, the post-16 sector has seen substantial increases in student numbers yet continues to suffer from a lack of funding when compared with schools and higher education. Recruiting and retaining teachers is an ongoing issue for colleges and other post-16 providers and student can face challenging transitions between secondary school and college, particularly if they did not achieve the grades that they hoped for or needed in their GCSEs. Their own motivations to achieve well in resits can vary, having already received a grade (below Grade 4) which is often perceived as failure.

Practice Review

In response to persistent low achievement rates in GCSE English and Maths resits, the EEF commissioned a practice review to help build a clearer picture of the challenges facing resit teachers and leaders in the post-16 sector. The full review (Crisp et al., 2023) can be accessed on the EEF website here: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/post-16-practice-review>

Rationale and overall approach

The review is a mixed-methods, practice- and policy-focused study. Working with established networks in the post-16 sector, the review team engaged with further education (FE) and sixth form colleges to collect and collate robust, high-quality data, including capturing experiences and perspectives of leaders, teachers/lecturers and students involved with post-16 study. This work sat alongside a desk-based review, which aimed to build a comprehensive understanding of existing and tested interventions, and map common practices and policies.

In broad terms the evidence base for GCSE resits is extremely weak. There are very few established programmes available for evaluation, and where evaluations have occurred they have tended to focus on smaller scale, action research projects such as those linked to the Centres for Excellence in Maths (CfEM) initiative (ETF, 2024). There is growing interest in research in the post-16 sector (including that conducted by practitioners), but further work is needed to better understand the needs of post-16 learners, to support teachers and leaders in their work, and to promote the development of ongoing system-level improvement.

Key findings



Pedagogy

The review highlights examples of effective pedagogy, including that from other phases and subjects, using relatively well-established, evidence-informed principles related to formative assessment, cognitive science (e.g., spaced learning) or mastery approaches. While transfer of these into post-16 contexts is potentially promising, more research is needed to underpin our knowledge of how these principles and practices can be effectively adapted and translated for resit learners.

The review did not identify well-evidenced guidance for specific teaching and learning strategies for GCSE resits. Nor was there much discussion of how good post-16 academic-focused pedagogy might differ when compared to Key Stage 4 GCSE Maths and English teaching. Some programmes based their approach on those found to be effective elsewhere, including mastery approaches (e.g. in Maths), one-to-one or small group tutoring, and cognitive science strategies. Establishing promising principles and practices for effective post-16 resit pedagogy needs to be an urgent priority for supporting improvement in this area.



Assessment

The review highlighted the potential value of high-quality diagnostic assessment at the outset of learners' GCSE resit programmes. While there is widespread recognition of the importance of ongoing formative assessment and a broad array of practices, systems and ideas in use to enable assessment for learning, no clear trends emerged in relation to specific techniques, tools or systems of assessment which colleagues are engaging with at this stage.

Practitioners identified a range of approaches during the review, but there was no overall agreement on specific approaches for English or Maths. In contrast to Maths, where there was some evidence of a number of tried and tested approaches to promoting approaches using formative assessment strategies, such as the 5Rs (Hanley et al., 2021) or Realistic Maths Education (RME) (Hough et al., 2017) there is a distinct lack of research on approaches to formative assessment in English. Funding for the ETF's CfEM initiative (ETF, 2024) has led to a range of resources and action-research focused projects in Maths, most of which suggest positive outcomes from various formative assessment approaches.



Curriculum

The evidence about curriculum coverage and focus, and a tendency to opt for either a targeted or core curriculum approach, has implications for how to successfully design interventions for resits. Support for a core approach was more apparent in mastery-focused programmes and programmes designed to cover common topics across the curriculum. There is a clearer picture of what a comprehensive curriculum programme looks like in Maths than in English – neither the desk review nor the fieldwork uncovered anything comparable in terms of ‘core’ curriculum development for English. Programmes in English showed there is a greater emphasis on diagnostics and identifying/addressing student strengths and weaknesses, rather than a standardised common curriculum.

Findings from the report indicate that potentially effective approaches combine both core and targeted curriculum strategies; they are not designed to simply re-deliver GCSE courses. Instead, they take a position on:

- how to identify gaps in knowledge
- how to overcome barriers previously encountered
- how to revise and recap prior (but not necessarily secure) learning
- what common/core or foundational knowledge is needed for all resit learners.

Contextualisation of learning, either related to vocational subject or ‘real-life’ contexts, was a key theme to emerge from the literature review and fieldwork. However, evidence about the value of contextualising learning in terms of students’ academic outcomes is less strong. Further work in relation to conceptualising, theorising and applying contextualised approaches is needed. There are also considerations linked to the alignment of a contextualised curriculum with the (more formal or non-contextualised) requirements of GCSE examinations (see e.g. Runge et al., 2019).



Learner Needs

The literature and evidence collected from the review reiterates the need to consider learner needs and adverse prior experiences of learning. Our analyses suggest that success for post-16 resits, perhaps to a greater degree than in KS4 teaching and learning, requires effective integration of academic and socio-emotional approaches. The evidence base for these kinds of interventions is, however, very limited.

A major theme throughout the desk review and fieldwork was the importance of developing practices that are informed by understanding and supporting learner needs, backgrounds and experience. This includes the general barriers to learning that young people undertaking resits

tended to face, and those specific to the resit process - how students respond to the perceived ‘failure’ of their original GCSEs. Issues such as attendance, motivation, engagement,

confidence and behaviour are often priorities for post-16 teachers and leaders, and influence how resit teaching and learning is organised and delivered.

The literature provides several good accounts of the context and challenges of post-16 resit courses (e.g., Noyes and Dalby, 2020) that identify key factors relating to individual learner needs and backgrounds. As a result, we identified a range of strategies designed to address and support learners' needs, including:

- developing a contrasting learning experience from that of school.
- creating a classroom culture in which students feel included and safe.
- building positive relationships with individual students.
- pedagogical adaptations to meet the learning needs of individuals and groups.

Noyes and Dalby (2020)

We recommend that further research is needed which integrates these kinds of approaches with strategies designed to improve academic outcomes.



Teacher recruitment/retention and development

The ability of FE institutions to recruit, retain and develop a highly skilled workforce was the biggest reported barrier to ensuring that learners are receiving high-quality teaching. CPD was seen by many of the interviewees as vital in bridging this gap, as it equips teachers with the skills to provide learners with effective support, regardless of their own prior level of training. The current teaching recruitment/retention crisis presents significant challenges in relation to having enough qualified colleagues available.

A recurring theme in both the literature and fieldwork was the importance of teacher supply, expertise and development. Although there is no empirical evidence specifically relating to GCSE resits, there is a common view that teacher qualifications and specialisms in Maths and English are important factors. Multiple interviewees in leadership positions spoke about the difficulty they faced in recruiting qualified teachers, particularly in Maths. As a result, many practitioners do not have a formal teaching qualification and/or are teaching outside of their subject specialist area. The issue is compounded by the typically lower salaries paid to those in the Further Education sector.

There is, therefore, a need to focus on professional development for all teachers, but particularly for those who do not hold teaching qualifications or subject specialist qualifications. Some studies (Maughan et al., 2016; CUREE, 2014) pointed to CPD as an area requiring significantly more development, resourcing and research. A number of recently trialled Maths interventions have embedded elements of professional development which have been positively received (Hanley et al., 2021; Hough et al., 2017).

Recommendations

The key recommendation from the practice review was that the **EEF should sustain and grow its focus on post-16 English and maths for low-attaining and disadvantaged learners** – including, but not limited to, GCSE resits. We would also like to see the development of further programmes of research from organisations beyond the EEF (building on, for example, some recent work by the Nuffield Foundation (e.g. Davies et al., 2020, Lupton et al., 2021) and the ETF's CfEM and OTLA initiatives).

The review identified three categories of recommendations.

1. Research to better understand the context and conditions under which teaching and learning happen for lower-attaining post-16 learners, including the following:

- What do we know about creating more effective transitions between secondary schools and post-16 institutions for lower-attaining students?
- What choices do post-16 institutions make about the organisation of GCSE resit learners and how do these choices impact on outcomes?
- What are post-16 institutions doing to develop, embed and evaluate meaningful diagnostic assessment approaches for GCSE resitters, both at the outset of learners' post-16 resit studies and throughout their studies?
- What do we know about the characteristics and capacities of the (highly heterogeneous) post-16 English and Maths teacher workforce?

2. Intervention developments and trials to generate a more robust evidence base about the impact of particular practices and interventions, including investment in:

- Vertical transfer: promising pedagogical practices for learners at Key Stage 3 and 4, or in higher education, that could be translated and adapted for post-16 resit classrooms.
- Horizontal transfer: promising pedagogical practices from vocational and academic post-16 courses that could be adapted and implemented in post-16 resit classrooms.
- Multiple outcome/combined interventions: programmes that deliberately and rigorously blend a small number of interventions, testing how these interventions can provide holistic support for improved outcomes (as highlighted in Maughan et al., 2016).
- Collaborative, place-based interventions: locally driven approaches to improvement, funding a coalition of schools, colleges, employers, local and national organisations to co-ordinate a small range of well-evidenced and robust approaches for those involved in GCSE resits.

3. Support and resources to improve the generation and use of evidence among post-16 practitioners and institutions, including support to:

- Extend and adapt the teaching and learning toolkit for a post-16 context and promote research literacy, engagement use among post-16 leaders and institutions.

- Invest in the extension of the remit of Research Schools, and in new Research Colleges, to extend and develop networks and professional learning communities; to support post-16 providers with evidence use; and to provide CPD.

For further details, check out the full Practice Review report here: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/post-16-practice-review>

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